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Inquiring Words

May we arise today through God's strength to pilot us;
God's might to uphold us, God's wisdom to guide us,
God's eye to look before us, God's ear to hear us,

I arise today – through the strength of heaven;
Light of sun, splendour of fire,
Speed of lightning, swiftness of wind,
Depth of the sea, stability of earth, firmness of rock.

May we arise today - God's way to lie before us,
God's shield to protect us, God's word to speak to us,
God's hand to guard us.

I arise today in the name of stillness, home of belonging,
I arise today blessed by all things ~
Wings of breath, delight of eyes, wonder of whisper,
Intimacy of touch, eternity of soul, urgency of thought,
Miracle of health, embrace of God.

May we live this day compassionate of heart,
clear in word, Gracious in awareness, courageous in thought, generous in love.

*Words from 'St Patrick's Breast-plate' and John O'Donohue,
adapted by the Rev Sheena Gabriel for worship at the Unitarian
General Assembly Meetings.*

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A party invitation is just the start

In his Anniversary Service sermon, **Alex Bradley** invited Unitarians to a feast of the heart.

The great poet parson, George Herbert, was born in Montgomery, Powys, in 1593. And, despite coming from a family of high rank, served as a simple village priest in Wiltshire. This is a verse from his poem '*The Call*':

*Come my Light, my Feast, my Strength,
Such a Light, as shows a feast;
Such a Feast, as mends in length:
Such a Strength, as makes his guest.*

First, there comes an invitation...

It's one of the pleasures of life to be invited to a party. Perhaps it's a simple social gathering, for drinks and a few nibbles. The invitation may specify, 'bring a bottle'. It may simply say, 'come to our party'. Or maybe it's a formal dinner party or a wedding breakfast. What matters is, you are invited! You are going to the party. You will attend the wedding. You will attend the ball.

After the euphoria cools, other thoughts creep in. How will I get there? Car or cab? What shall I wear? Where will I sit? Who else will be there? Will I be next to a lovely person or will I end up next to a crashing bore? Will there even be *anyone* there I know? Or *someone* at least I can talk to? What will the food be like? (Should I eat something beforehand?)

Best 'Dracula' at the do

Then there are fancy-dress parties. They can be a challenge. I'm naturally shy, and the very few times I've been to one, I've had no idea what to wear. Once at Halloween, in desperation, I put on dark trousers, a roll-neck black jumper and my black clerical gown to look vaguely Victorian and sinister. Much to my amazement, everyone thought I was the best Dracula at the party!

So, what about another social context – going to a church or chapel or meeting house for the first time. 'What should I wear?' might be a real dilemma. Smart casual? Jeans and open-neck shirt?

It can be like attending a meal. Who will I meet? Will anyone even speak to me? Will they be friendly?

And where will I sit? Inspired at a meal where people jockeyed for the best places, Jesus told a story about a wedding feast. Take the lowest place, he said: then the groom might call you up to the top table.

Hazards of picking a pew

These preoccupations couldn't happen in our churches. Could they? As a new Unitarian I visited a little country chapel. On walking in, I was surprised how small it was, and made an instant decision to sit in the last but one row.

Surely I wouldn't be in anyone's favourite seat there. Well, I was wrong. An elderly lady came and asked, please could I sit somewhere else, as she liked to sit by the window. It didn't put me off. But it might have done.

I once went along to a Quaker worship meeting. The building was spacious, with several meeting rooms. I sat with some people already there. There was quite a mix, with everyone chatting away happily and I quickly got into conversation.

After about five minutes, I had a strange feeling. They



The Anniversary Service preacher was the Rev Alex Bradley, principal of Unitarian College. Photo by Kieran Raza

were a great bunch of people. But somehow, they didn't fit my image of Quakers. It turned out I had wandered into a substance-abuse survivors group. They were amused when they discovered my mistake. And one man, who was going out for fish and chips, asked me if I wanted some as well. They were such a happy and friendly group of people! I had not experienced any of their struggles but they gave me a welcome as if I might be one of them.

At a synagogue service a friendly attender took me under his wing and showed me the relevant pages in the prayer book. What seemed obvious to regular worshippers would not be to a visitor. Would something similar happen in our congregations?

I hope so.

Not all parties are lovely

In theory, a party or a meal or a feast is an occasion for people to enjoy themselves. But the reality can be different – a dull and long, drawn-out meal, or a party where people stand around the edges of a room in cliques, not mixing with others. At least the smokers can escape outside for a few minutes.

You may be thinking: 'what has this to do with religion, or theology, or Unitarianism?' Parties? Feasts? Food? Dress? Enjoying yourself? For goodness sake! This should be about religion, not enjoyment!

I don't know about going outside to smoke, but I have sometimes been to church services (*not* Unitarian services) where I would have had more joy at a funeral. A reading by Vincent Silliman says: 'may our faith be to us life and joy'. A service that is full of joy lifts our spirits. As Unitarian College Principal, I visit congregations to hear students preach. On one occasion, my wife came along. The worship was a delight. The music was good, the atmosphere was friendly and the service was lively and interesting. On the long drive home, we agreed that if we had been first-time visitors, we would certainly have come back. The meal lived up to the promise of the menu.

What might pull people into the Unitarian orbit? Whatever the particular theological leaning of a local congregation, it is the warmth of the welcome that will attract and keep a newcomer. An elderly member of a previous congregation was

(Continued on next page)

Commit to supporting a life of the spirit

(Continued from previous page) brought to chapel every Sunday by her daughter. The daughter was friendly but would never come in. A few years later her mother developed dementia and the daughter needed to come into the chapel with her. She felt at home from that very first service.

A feast can have many courses. A meal can have different tastes and flavours. We hope the food will be digestible and nutritious and tasty.

Food for the mind

We hope it will be well presented and have a tempting aroma. The same is true of worship. Our Unitarian and other liberal forebears, known as the 'Rational Dissenters', emphasised good food for the mind: to expound and understand the Scripture, to seek some understanding of the ways of God and to outline a way of life both rational and ethical. This was – and still is – a laudable objective. It's no accident that institutional Unitarianism grew during the 18th-century Enlightenment.

The teaching was good food for the mind – 'nutritious' and sometimes excellent. But it was too often served without joy. One of our leading historians, Dr Jeremy Goring, says of this period: 'the evidence is that the average Arminian sermon, though its intellectual and moral content was of the highest order, was a pretty boring performance'. Rationality became merely rationalistic. Pedantry replaced piety.

Martineau and others, and Channing in America, pioneers of the Romantic Movement in faith, infused Unitarianism with an aesthetic quality, with a renewed emphasis on feeling and intuition and the inner life of the soul.

There is a story of Goodness, who invited many important people to her feast but they all turned it down: they had some excuse why they could not come. So she invited those on the highways and byways: the downtrodden, the lonely, refugees, to come to her party and the great feast. It is a re-telling of the parable of Jesus. The message is that *everyone* is welcome to come in! This is the mission of our Unitarian and Free Christian tradition. There is a welcome to all! We are not an establishment for the benefit of a few. Dissent and freedom of thought are in our very DNA.

Welcome is more important than theology

So what is in the Unitarian Feast today? The answers will depend on the local 'caterers' with their own particular 'cuisines'. Some congregations will have one particular theological position; others will differ. That's fine. One size does not fit all, nor should it. There is a huge variety, from our starting point of freedom of expression, freedom of conscience and the freedom to explore ideas from whatever source of inspiration. We are, in effect, a federation of congregations united by ties of history, friendship and religious freedom and a shared commitment to the life of the spirit.

I want to focus on that last phrase, a shared commitment to the life of the spirit. What might that entail for our gathering



The Rev Alex Bradley and his wife Jean enjoy a reception at a previous GA. In his sermon he thanked Jean 'my wife and fellow minister, my muse and inspiration'.

of spiritual communities and spiritual seekers?

I gave a service in which I used the reading from Chapter 14 of Matthew's Gospel about Jesus walking on the water and saving Peter and then I used a favourite poem of mine, Stevie Smith's, *Not Waving but Drowning*. Both point to a larger truth.

Now, I don't think Peter, or Jesus, walked on water. It's an allegory. When we read the Bible or another sacred scripture, we should ask, 'what message is it trying to convey?' The Egyptian scholar, Origen of Alexandria, spoke of the 'spiritual sense' of

Scripture. What is the spiritual sense here? What stands out for me is: Jesus 'reaches out his hand'. Immediately, we have a key to the text. Religion is about reaching out a hand to another. It's a message that can be shared by people of every faith and none. This way, we move away from pointless discussions about miracles we cannot believe and approach the heart of the matter – that we are called to care for one another, to hold out a hand.

Metaphysical questions aren't important

Forty years ago I first read Edward Conze's book on Buddhism. Conze says: 'In its origin and intention, a doctrine of salvation, Buddhism has always been marked by its intensely practical attitude.' He recalls how the Buddha refused to answer metaphysical questions, regarding them as pointless. A man shot by an arrow, said Buddha, would not ask who shot it, whether he was married and whether he was fair or dark. He would just get rid of the arrow. Similarly, Jesus was asked a hypothetical question about a woman who marries seven brothers in turn, all of whom die. Which one will be married to her at the resurrection? He brushed it aside, saying the questioners misunderstood. Salvation is about what we do, rather than what we believe.

Unfortunately, the concept of 'salvation' has picked up some other connotations. Some will say, 'believe this doctrine or subscribe to this creed and you will be saved'. Most Unitarians would say, 'thanks, but no thanks'. We tend to be 'once-born' rather than 'twice-born' in our psychological make-up. We do not feel the need for the type of 'salvation' that goes with guilt and authoritarianism. I want salvation but not that kind of salvation.

So, I hope worship with my fellow Unitarians and religious liberals will be enjoyable, even fun at times. I hope it will be comforting, reassuring and affirmative. But I hope that it will transform us. I do not say, 'convert' us (What? try to convert a Unitarian? It might be easier to make water run uphill!) This is not about trying to change anyone's views (although if you choose to do so of your own free will, that's fine).

We do not transform each other. It is the act of shared worship that can transform us. I first experienced this in the quiet of Quaker worship and then in our own Unitarian worship. We can be, and often are, transformed by the spirit of the divine,

(Continued on next page)

'On the Side of Liberty' is launched

On The Side of Liberty: A Unitarian Historical Miscellany, by Alan Ruston and published by the Lindsey Press, was launched at the Unitarian General Assembly meetings in Birmingham. For this volume Alan has selected a range of articles from his published output, to present some of the individuals who have shaped the development of British Unitarian thought over the past 300 years. Here are two short extracts:

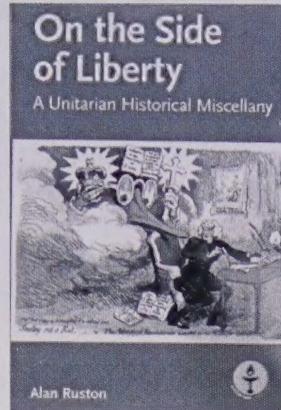
From the obituary of Christopher Rawdon, founder of the Ministers Benevolent Fund (1858)

In the early 1790s business took his father from time to time to Portugal, and on one occasion, while waiting wind-bound at Falmouth, he met there a Portuguese gentleman who had just arrived from Lisbon. During their time together they discussed the advantages of giving children in very early life a knowledge of foreign languages, and Mr Rawdon mentioned the common custom in Switzerland for parents in the French and German cantons to exchange children for a time with this in view. The idea so pleased Senor de Paiva that he immediately proposed to Mr Rawdon to send his son Christopher to Lisbon, and to take in exchange his nephew. After some hesitation, Mr Rawdon consented to this sudden proposal, and, before Senor de Paiva left, he wrote the following order, which a few weeks afterwards that gentleman presented in person:

Dear Wife — Deliver to the bearer thy first-born.

Signed: Christopher Rawdon

Whatever may have been the feelings of the mother on this first intimation to her of the arrangement made at Falmouth,



she knew too well the decision of her husband's character to hesitate a moment in yielding obedience. A servant was forthwith despatched to Otley, where young Christopher was spending his holidays with his grandfather, and on his arrival he was handed over to Senor de Paiva, who carried him to Lisbon and kept him as one of his own children for upwards of a year.

(Obituary, *Christian Reformer* 1858)

From *The Inquirer*: Unitarians at Coronations

Just one representative attended the coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in 1937, this time the President of the General Assembly,

Dr N. Bishop Harman, who described the experience in vivid terms in *The Inquirer* (21 May 1937). An interesting figure, he was a leading oculist, whose descendants include Harriet Harman, the deputy leader of the Labour Party, and Dame Antonia Fraser. 'Beside me was the Clerk of the Yearly Meeting of the Quakers, and Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists and Presbyterians. The parsons were garbed in Geneva gowns and bands. The laymen were in court dress except for the Quaker who on account of his scruples was allowed to wear evening dress. I could not help chaffing him by an enquiry as to what George Fox would have thought of his trousers!'

On The Side of Liberty: A Unitarian Historical Miscellany, priced at £9.50, is available from the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, 1-6 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY (tel. 0207 240 2384) or via major online booksellers.

There's a place at our table for all

(Continued from previous page)

both in ourselves and beyond ourselves. It is the Spirit that I call God. People will experience this spirit in different ways and different forms. It is the transformation itself that matters; the form is secondary.

Service never ends

'Is the service over?' one friend asked another. 'No', was the reply. 'The worship is finished but the service is not yet done.' That is the other aspect of our Unitarian tradition: the call to service. It is grounded in a practical mysticism that sees the worship of God as an integral whole with the service of humanity. Every time our worship concludes we put our faith into action. Our Unitarian body has punched far above its weight in its practical good works. We take seriously the principle that underlies the words of Jesus: 'why do you call me Lord, Lord and not do what I tell you?'

Our faith community is rooted in the Hebrew and Christian tradition that speaks of humanity, male and female, being made in the very image of God, and of God's embodiment in human kind. Unitarianism grew in the teaching of Jesus. His place in our tradition gives us unique insights into, and contacts with, other faiths. This is true in ways both great and small. Over 20 years ago I was deeply moved when a Muslim man, who worked in a corner shop near my church, gave me a Bible – completely out of the blue. Perhaps he recognised

me as a person of the Book. In that small gesture, faith spoke to faith.

Our work today speaks of outsiders becoming insiders – a place at the table for everyone. Our faith may not appeal to everyone, but it welcomes everyone. We receive a great spiritual feast of delicacies and choice foods. But we are also called to feed others, to stretch out a hand, to save. Our faith can inspire us to reflect the divine love in our daily lives, however imperfectly. Our faith values and prizes the intellect. But first and foremost, it must be a religion of the heart.

There has been much speculation about the future of our denomination. Some have asked whether it has a future. I don't know the answer, any more than I know who will be the winner of the 3.30 at Doncaster tomorrow.

But I feel a profound sense of gratitude to our denomination. It has helped me transform my own spiritual life. It has nurtured me, given me the freedom to grow and change as my own liberal Christian faith developed and deepened. The tradition has fed me, fed people like us and many others. We Unitarians may have many and various theological tastes and choices of religious food, but we feed one another and share a feast in harmony and love. It is a faith that can unite. Welcome to the feast of the heart! Amen.

The Rev Alex Bradley is principal at Unitarian College Manchester and minister at Norcliffe Chapel, Styal.

y Peter Francis

hen I was first ordained I ministered an old woman who was dying. As an experienced and young clergyperson whose first experience of sitting at the bedside of someone during their last few hours, I seemed to be far more nervous than her. She picked up the vibe and kindly said, 'Don't worry, Vicar. I have read the gospels and I have seen Ben Hur.' Thus started my desire to bring together theology and film.

Films provide us with our contemporary texts. The heyday of cinema-going was in the 1940s reaching a peak in

1946 (UK average weekly attendance of 31.5 million). Cinema attendance declined from the 1950s onwards with the emergence of television. In the 1980s in the UK there were only 1 million weekly admissions. Today, film is even more pervasive than in the heyday of cinema going. Statistics show that the total size of the film audience in the UK is estimated to be about 4.6 billion, calculated from all sources – cinema, DVD/Video, View on Demand, and Film on television. Cinema comprises only 4% of that audience. Those figures represent 81 film viewing occasions per person per annum – an average of seven films per person per month.

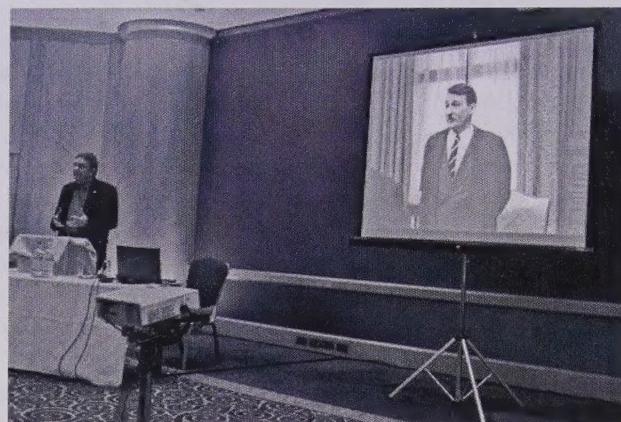
Screens dominate the lives of our contemporaries – the millennials are sometimes called 'screen-agers'. Margaret Miles has accurately stated, 'popular film provides an index of the anxieties and longings of large audiences'. People of faith can so easily live in safe, religious bubbles, impervious to what is going on in contemporary culture. Faith communities would do well to view, to listen, to learn or they will be stuck forever 'answering questions nobody is asking.'

Film enables theology, as Clive Marsh has pointed out, 'to work out what it is going to be possible to say in our contemporary climate about any of theology's major themes.' It also gives a strong indication 'how it can be said, and of the values, and assumptions that it must engage with.'

Films can also provide what the novelist Zadie Smith terms 'a practice place for morals, an ethical enterprise,' enabling us to watch, 'in safety, people choosing what they must do, and what they lose when they choose wrongly; that it is the closest possible rehearsal for the real thing.'

Films can revivify hope. Chekhov's statement about plays holds true for film as well. 'The best of them are realistic and paint life as it is, but because every (frame) is permeated, as with a juice, by an awareness of purpose, you feel, beside life as it is, also life as it ought to be, and it captivates you.'

The popular success of cinema in the 20th century led to it being labelled as entertainment rather than art. It is often considered a product of consumption rather than something to be admired. But filmmaking is a complex and skilful art, employing the techniques of modernism with its mix of shots, the ability to cross-cut between characters and narratives – flash backs and flash forwards. Film can use a variety of styles and camera angles, imaginative use of sound and colour palettes. This is the spectacular smorgasbord of cinematic techniques that each film could almost be a Cubist painting. Add to that mix all influences and elements from literature and drama, skills of sound, camera, music and acting from artists all over the world, and it is possible to see a most eclectic and modernist mix that transcends conventional pigeonholing as high or low culture. The techniques of filmmaking suggest modernism, but the nature of watching narratives on screen suggests



Peter Francis gives the John Rely Beard lecture at the GA meetings. Photo by Kieran Raza

realism. We believe (if only fleetingly) what we see – there is an illusion that the camera cannot lie. Film is a potent reminder of these traits of modernism and realism.

And now for something completely different: see this clip: <http://bit.ly/1RB1>

People were quick to call Monty Python's *Life of Brian* blasphemous but in fact its only blasphemy is against the standards of Cecil B DeMille. The scene of the Sermon on the Mount is a wonderful spiritual moment in a Biblical epic. Jesus speaking in public-school English – very slowly – to a carefully composed crowd who could not have been able to hear a word

he was saying. The scene is straight out of any of the renaissance religious paintings which acted as templates for Hollywood Biblical epics – even before Cecil B De Mille's 1927 *King of Kings* to the epics of the 1960s through Franco Zeffirelli's reverential six-hour *Jesus of Nazareth* to Mel Gibson's 2004 horror film *The Passion of the Christ* to the recently released *Risen* (Kevin Reynolds, 2016).

Early Biblical films were really only tableaux vivant. The



Attendees at the 'Sermon on the Mount' in the film 'Life of Brian'.

would be based around an incident from Jesus's life, people would react with awe, and then the director would move on to the next tableau. In all of Classical Western art there are only about 40 scenes of Jesus' life that have ever been painted. Film took those 40 scenes and expanded them into a framework.

Moviemakers were often sincere in thinking that their products would deliver a spiritual experience to the audience. Indeed, the early filmmakers were very reverential towards their subject matter. DeMille insisted that HB Warner who played Jesus in King of Kings should be dressed in role whenever on set. If not being filmed, Warner should sit alone in his trailer and prepare himself for this momentous role. He would, DeMille believed, bring the watcher a spiritual experience. In fact, Warner was an alcoholic and so being shut away with a bottle for large parts of the day certainly allowed him to be spirit filled but not quite in the way that DeMille intended. Of course, such vicarious spirituality or 'lazy awe' is not possible. It brings the spiritual down to earth rather than lifting audiences up to heaven. True, audiences would marvel at the wonders on screen but they increasingly had to be enticed into cinemas with a hint of sex and spectacle. DeMille was the master at combining the two. His *Sign of The Cross* (1932) has Claudette Colbert bathing in asses' milk in a lesbian scene as well as uneasy sexual moments during the martyrdom of early Christians.

Biblical films can be split into two distinct types 'reverential readings' and 're-imaginings'. It is those re-imaginings that seem to capture a spirituality and even become works of art in their own right.

ig in the dark – seeing salvation

olo Passolini dedicated his *Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (1964) to the great reforming Pope John XXIII (the instigator of II). Pasolini was a gay Marxist but he saw within the Gospel a strong humanitarian and social message. Filmed using actors it captures Jesus's revolutionary spirit and his affect on ordinary people. There is a remarkable scene of the visit of the Queen with Odette singing the spiritual 'A Motherless Child' on the soundtrack and the haunting image of a very young Virgin Mary. (See clip here: <http://bit.ly/1TeOldC>)

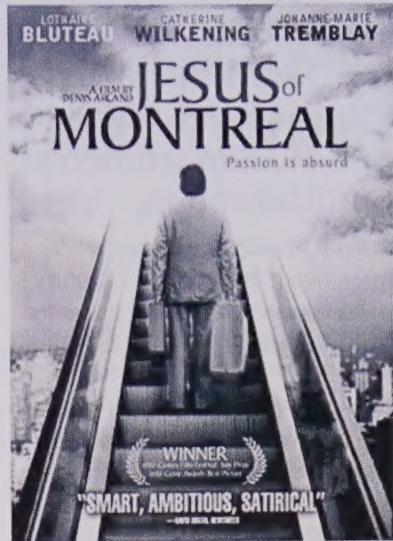
Second of these re-imaginings is *Jesus of Montreal* (Denys Arcand, 1989). 'A group of actors putting on an interpretive Passion Play in Montreal begin to experience a meshing of their characters with their private lives as the production takes form against the growing opposition of the Catholic church'. Here is a re-working of the cleansing of the temple imposed on an audition that an actress is attending which is prompted by the Jesus-figure. (The film is available with English subtitles here: <http://bit.ly/1MwxedQ>)

This audition scene transforms our understanding of the source material. It shatters our stained-glass image of a nice Jesus: If disruption to the scene took place with a whip there would have been real hurt and pain. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild – not!

In Mark Dornford-May's *Son Of Man* (2006) in which the gospel is transferred to a contemporary corrupt Southern African state, filmed and created by South Africans and filmed in Soweto. In *Jesus of Montreal* it challenges and transforms our understanding of the source material.

Son of Man and *Jesus of Montreal* reverse the hermeneutic circle rather than the text illuminating the film, the film serves to illuminate it. We learn something more about the ancient text from watching the modern film. Our understanding of the text will never quite be the same again. These three Jesus films are all prize-winning films, they are streets ahead of other Biblical films. They are examples of cinematic art that really work.

There is a tendency to see the hero figure in Westerns, Sci-fi and superhero movies as a Christ figure. I am sceptical about this. There is a familiar trope of the hero who comes from nowhere, shows people what they should be living, suffers for them and with them, and then disappears mysteriously as he or she came. This idea of the mono-myth in all cultures has been fully developed by Joseph Campbell in *Hero With a Thousand Faces*. George Lucas deliberately uses the mono-myth in the *Star Wars* saga. But it is there in outline in most Westerns and many Sci-fi films – Campbell would also claim that it



weekend took as much). The average cost of making a Hollywood film is £41 million pounds. Clearly those investing such fortunes in a product are not doing so for philanthropic purposes but to achieve a good rate of return. The producers spend on average a further £23 million on marketing costs for a Hollywood film. The potential returns for a good 'property' are immense. The point is that uppermost in the producer's mind is the question, 'will this film make money?' What cultural triggers – what is there in the air, what hopes, anxieties in society – that the current zeitgeist – mean this film has a chance of succeeding? Why the right time right? Who needs to star in it – choice of cast brings with each star their previous filmography? How is it advertised? I am not saying every film is subject to this same set of questions, but most major productions are. (This, actually, is much the same way I approach the gospels. Why have the four evangelists chosen this story, or altered the story, or left out the other story? What are they responding to that has made them shape their text in this way? I find it a fruitful approach).

The films I have discussed tell us more about the world and the political context they were made in than they do about the Christ story. Pasolini shows a rebellious and changing 1960s society even infecting the Catholic Church. *Jesus of Montreal* was, at its core, anti-Thatcher-Reagan type of economic capitalism. *Son of Man* clearly springs from the hopes of a new South Africa after apartheid and disappointment at the continued corruption and violence both in the country and other parts of Africa.

Take a popular film like *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) that engages with Vietnam, political corruption (it was released just after the Watergate scandal) as well as the sexual politics of the day. All of this can be read from the film and its advertising. Or, consider Cecil B DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956). The whole film implicitly, and in the prologue explicitly, is about totalitarian communism and the forces of freedom throwing off those shackles.

I hope this will encourage you to think about film and its cultural context. The 1968 film, *If...* is set in a public school and is a damning indictment of British establishment and the role of religion within it. There is a scene where the headmaster (who, perhaps, represents the Prime Minister or similar establishment figure) speaks to some rebellious students. Religion is firmly put in its place. (The full film is available here: <http://bit.ly/1ThqTd8>)

Peter Francis is an Anglican priest who has worked in the West Midlands, London and Scotland, where he was Provost of St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow. He was a contributor and co-editor of *Cinéma et Divinité* (SCM Press) and has written and lectured on film in the USA and Australia.



Angels help the injured superhero in *Spider-Man 2* (2004)

is the story of Christ. So it would be more pertinent to ask if the story conforms to this trope rather than seeing Christ in numerous guises.

There is a deliberate play on Christ and salvation from Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man 2*. (See the clip here: <http://bit.ly/1R4mzep>)

Spider-Man saves his people, they discover who he really is. He is removed

Reconciling identities can stop terror

In her Keynote Address to the General Assembly, **Tehmina Kazi**, director of British Muslims for Secular Democracy, stressed Muslim women's role in preventing radicalisation.

Since 2010, the entire Prevent strategy has undergone significant reform. As of this summer, it is now a statutory duty for schools, prisons, local authorities and NHS trusts to 'have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.'

The strategy also includes non-violent extremism, which has been defined as 'opposition to fundamental British values', including 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs'. While these are universal values, rather than specifically British ones, I think it is critical to actively uphold them, and use them to present a strong counter-narrative to extremist voices. Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF) defines fundamentalism as 'modern political movements that use religion to gain or consolidate power, whether working within – or in opposition to – the state'. Craftily, they can also amass power from civil society mobilisations. The ultimate aim is to present their interpretation of religion as 'normative', quash any kind of dissent, and gaslight said dissenters as being 'crazy and unreliable', or casting them outside the fold of Islam. All fundamentalist movements – no matter which religion they take inspiration from – have sought to control women's bodies, minds and voices.

As my associate Kalsoom Bashir, from the Muslim women's group Inspire, said in a recent *Guardian* interview: 'When you have ideologies out there – that homosexuals are going to be condemned to hellfire, that you mustn't talk to [gay people], or that if this was a Muslim state they wouldn't be allowed – I do have a problem with that. I'm proud that the interpretation of Islam I adhere to is inclusive; it does not promote hatred or violence, or sow the seeds of division or suspicion. There are other [interpretations] that sit across the spectrum ... and I don't want my children to go down those paths.'

Bashir delivers Prevent training to police officers and teachers in Avon and Somerset, with the aim of making sure that children are kept safely in their families, and are getting the best out of their educational experiences. Rather than asking professionals to 'spy on' their charges, or single out particular incidents, the aim of the strategy is to get them to look out for a whole range of concerning behaviours. It is part of the pastoral care that all good teachers take seriously, and it makes sense because pupils spend more of their waking hours with teachers than with their parents. Children who are deemed vulnerable to radicalisation are sometimes referred to the Government's anti-radicalisation Channel programme, which has seen more than 4,000 referrals since 2012. But contrary to popular belief, a referral to Channel does not equate to 'being grassed up by police,' as one young person put it. Channel panels are chaired by the local authority, and the police are one of several agencies represented.

Further, there are many examples of Prevent successfully turning young women away from a path of extremism and fundamentalism. A young woman in Bristol started wearing a

headscarf in sixth-form, then disengaged from lessons and distanced herself from friends. Her teachers spoke to her friends, who conveyed that she had described them as 'not good Muslims anymore.' The young woman said she just wanted to 'focus on Islam' and thought that voting made one complicit in a 'kuffar' system. Once she was referred to Channel, a female theologian spoke to her about faith and identity in a nuanced way. The young woman had never had this kind of exposure, and came back to finishing her A-Levels.

Another story related to the 15-year-old, Yusra Hussein, who went missing from Bristol and ended up in Syria. Other girls in the vicinity ended up sympathising with her, after being dumped by Muslim men whom they had slept with. This ties in nicely with Mia Bloom's research on redemption, and the fact that some people see membership of an extremist group as providing a means of redemption for committing so-called 'sins'. In response to this, Kalsoom Bashir led a workshop on relationships between men and women in a faith context. In this, she said it was natural to be attracted to people, but that the young women shouldn't feel pressured into doing anything they don't want to do. Far from shutting down debates on controversial issues, this is an example where Prevent created a space for hot-button issues to be discussed in a safe and secure environment. The facilitator was careful to foster both critical and caring thinking, as in, how we relate to others around us. This fits in with OFSTED good practice guidelines too. At university level, the Prevent strategy requires the broadening of debate to include counter-narratives and alternative views at Islamic Society events.

A third example is of the Muslim boy at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham who not only demanded a prayer room, but insisted that female Muslim pupils needed to cover their faces with a headscarf. A roundtable discussion took place with the pupil's parents, who were very supportive, and understood the teachers' concerns. Finally, there are a number of high-profile myths surrounding Prevent. The *Guardian* posted a critical article on the policy by Angela Neustatter on 12 January 2016, where it praised Frederick Bremer School in Walthamstow for putting up a display of photographs on the Paris attacks with comments from Muslim students. What the article failed to include was that this – and the discussion on Paris in Citizenship classes – took place because of Prevent, not in spite of it.

The most important thing is to enable young Muslim women to reconcile their identities as female, British and Muslim. I am confident that the Prevent programme has advanced enough to make way for these exchanges. Of course, this doesn't absolve civil society practitioners of our responsibilities in this area. While we should not hesitate to correct state institutions when they make mistakes, we should not automatically see them as the enemy, when they are our partners in safeguarding.



Tehmina Kazi

Eat with reverence and feel connected

Our lives are steeped in rituals, even if we don't always recognise and acknowledge them. And perhaps the most significant are based around food. I suspect that eating, in every sense, is a form of communion, of coming together in love. On its most basic level, it is our connection and communion with the earth from which we are all formed. Is there a more intimate and holy relationship in life than that with which we live, breathe and be?

Thoughtful, mindful, reverential eating is an awareness of what it means to participate in the holiness of life itself. How we eat is not only about feeding our bodies but also our minds, hearts and souls. The bread of life does not merely feed the physical body it feeds our whole personhood. If fed with reverence, we respond to life in reverential ways and participate in all its holiness.

Eating reverentially feeds our interconnectedness; interconnectedness feeds our sense of belonging; a healthy sense of belonging feeds our wholeness; a sense of wholeness relieves us from the spiritual hunger that so many seem to suffer from. If we eat reverentially we understand how we are interconnected to the earth from which we live and all that exists within this beautiful blue, green and brown planet. Eating reverentially links us to the people who prepare our food, those who grow our food, produce and transport it – as well as the plants and animals from which our food comes. Eating reverentially connects us compassionately with those who have nothing, who struggle to survive in this abundant world of ours – those for whom the search for daily bread is a daily struggle.

I see clearly a ritualistic and interconnected relationship with others and with life itself, but what about a personal relationship with food? Does how we eat and relate to food impact on how we relate to ourselves, and to life itself? Well surely everything in life stems from how we are fed.

During Lent, I participated in a series of Lent Breakfasts with Churches Together in Urmston. They began with the sharing of tea and toast before a theme talk and conversation. This year we explored 'The Lord's Prayer'. Each week someone chose a line and we spent time discussing our thoughts. One week we looked at the line 'Give us this day our daily bread'. Now, as it happens, I have not been taking my daily bread for quite some time. One of the changes in my diet was to give up bread. This along with other changes enabled me to move from a weight of over 20 stone to a little less than 12½ stone and a Body Mass Index (BMI) that went from 38.5 to a healthy 23.5. My relationship with food, with myself and with life itself has changed considerably these last few months.

Now while I may not be literally 'taking my daily bread', life is feeding me more nourishingly than ever before. As a result, I am feeding life and I am communing with life in new and wonderful ways.

Following the Lent Breakfast I went for a walk with thoughts about feeding and being fed floating around my consciousness and these words from Socrates singing in my heart and soul: 'Worthless people live only to eat and drink; people of worth eat and drink only to live.' It is a phrase I've heard in many forms, many times before. The most common being 'There are two types of people in the world, those who eat to live and those who live to eat', which I suspect is rooted in this quote from Socrates.

As I walked I thought about my relationship with food and

**From nothing
to Everything**
by
Danny Crosby



life and the relationship we all have with the two. I was thinking about food addiction and addiction in general and the things that rule our lives, the things of value in life, the things we worship in life and how they and our relationships with these things impact on our lives and the way we live. You see how we are fed and how we feed life really matters.

Just then I noticed a long line of deer in the park, all congregated in a kind of communion line. The park rangers had obviously laid out a long line of feed for them. I smiled as I observed them eating. Then I noticed something that made me smile ever more broadly. One after another the young deer, probably a little too old to still be called fawns, got up and began skipping off and enjoying themselves in the beauty of the park. These animals and all the animals in the park were eating to live, not living to eat. They were not slaves to the food they were eating. It was not their object of worship, the thing that meant the most to them. No instead it was the fuel by which they lived.

This got me thinking about worth and worship itself. It particularly brought to mind a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson: 'A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behoves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.'

Whatever it is that dominates our thoughts are the things that we worship, the things that are of highest worth in our lives. So if we live purely to eat, then that's of highest worth in our lives and our lives will be ruled by it. We will become consumed by the very thing that we are consuming while remaining hungry in our hearts and souls.

People say, 'you are what you eat.' Well perhaps this is true if you 'live to eat' instead of 'eating to live.' As I have said many times before, I am a great believer that everything matters. Everything we do and everything we do not do matters. How we are with one another also matters. How we relate to all life and the people we share this life with really matters. It is the same as our relationship with food, for it too will reflect on how we live.

Food and eating connect us to one another. We cannot live without it. Therefore it is no surprise that the most basic human rituals are based around food. These rituals and our engagement with them help us to sanctify life, to recognise the sacredness of our existence and all existence. Therefore if we bless the food we eat, the source that this food came from and those that we share this food with we will sanctify all life. And we will sanctify and make sacred both our existence and all life. We will develop reverence for life itself.

The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Altrincham and Urmston.

Come take a dip in the ‘Sea of Faith’

By Carol Palfrey

Religion – Where Next? is the challenging title for the 2016 Sea of Faith Conference to be held at the University of Leicester from Thursday 21-Saturday 23 July.

This year, with the help of three splendid speakers offering academic, theological and personal perspectives, and through our workshops, the Sea of Faith Network will be addressing perhaps its most important question ever, and one which impacts on us all, both as individuals and as Unitarians.

Our Conference title provides the opportunity to explore many other questions –

- What exactly is religion – A cultural, social, psychological creation?
- What drives it and sustains it?
- Why do some live for it, some die for it and some even kill for it?
- What has it to offer today and tomorrow, for ‘us’ and for ‘them’?
- Who cares anyway?

For the third year running one of the keynote speakers will be a Unitarian. This year the Rev Andrew Brown, our Minister from Cambridge, has accepted an invitation and chosen for his title: ‘The Freedom to be tomorrow what we are not today’. Andrew is a member of the Sea of Faith Network and hosts the Cambridge local group which in past years has been fortunate to be able to call upon Don Cupitt, the inspiration for the Network’s formation. For those of you who are not familiar with Andrew’s many interest and talents, the brief biopic he

provided for the Conference publicity may be of interest.

Accompanying Andrew on the Speakers’ podium will be Professor Denise Cush who, until recently, was Professor of Religion and Education at Bath Spa University. Her talk is titled: ‘I used to be religious but...’.

Our third speaker is Dr John Breadon, currently assistant chaplain at Eton College. He has spent most of his working life in schools and colleges but, from September, hopes to move into a new phase of his life as a counsellor in private practice and a secular celebrant. The title of John’s talk is: ‘I was religious but now I’m ...’

Since becoming a trustee of the network, I have tried to strengthen the link between Unitarians and the Sea of Faith Network, as I believe that there is great mutual benefit in such collaboration. I have been encouraged in these efforts by the enthusiasm with which all our Unitarian speakers – Derek McAuley in 2014 and Andy Pakula in 2015 – have taken up our invitations to speak.

Bearing in mind that most religious traditions in this country, including our own, are concerned about declining numbers and are reviewing their purpose and ‘mission’, the topic of this year’s conference seems timely. I hope it will have special appeal to Unitarians as we begin work on the Action Plan to implement the Unitarian Vision Document.

Full details and application forms are available on the Sea of Faith conference website: <http://bit.ly/22M0lJz> or send an email to me: c.palfrey@keme.uk.

Carol Palfrey is a member of Norwich Unitarians.

Best Practices: ‘Life Spirit’ attracts attention

It is 12 months since the launch of the book *Life Spirit* by the Rev David Usher. During that 12 months, a number of individuals and groups have followed the book, which is designed to help exploration of some of the big questions about life. Topics include:

- What is spirituality?
- The Role of Personal Faith.
- Making moral choices.
- Facing Death.

Here in the North West, the Lancashire Collaborative Ministry advertised the Life Spirit programme outside its churches in Padiham and Rawtenstall. The result was a mixed group of which one-third had been attracted by the nature of the course – with no prior connection to the Unitarian church.

Initially meetings were held once a month and began with sharing soup, bread, cheese and fruit together. This enabled participants to arrive, chat, put away whatever they had been doing during the day and focus on the theme of the session.

In the later stages, it was agreed that meeting monthly and considering only one chapter each time spread out the process too much and additional dates and chapters were added. Each member of the group had a copy of the book; the cost of the book being covered in the small charge (£4) for each session which also included the food and expenses of using the room. Having the book enabled each individual to read the chapter beforehand and to return to it with new thoughts after the discussion.

It was a deeply satisfying, thought-provoking process, valued by everyone who participated. Listening to and valuing

the beliefs and experiences of others is a powerful way to enrich our own exploration of these life questions.

Feedback from both the courses run in the North West has been very positive and plans are currently being made to offer further Life Spirit courses in the area and other different programmes for those who have already participated but who have expressed a desire to continue meeting in this way.

These are just a few of the comments made at the end of the programme:

‘Not being told what to think is a lovely concept and different from what I was brought up to think.’

‘Life Spirit is an alternative spiritual session to the traditional church service.’

‘Doing the Life Spirit course with other people has given me new insights into how my experiences have influenced my beliefs.’

‘Life Spirit has given me a greater commitment to continuing to explore my spirituality and to being open to the spiritual needs of other people.’

If you have not yet experienced *Life Spirit* within a group, please consider doing so in your own community. It will be an enhancing and spiritual experience for all who participate.

– Dot Hewardine, the Revs Gillian Peel and Jim Corrigan, Lancashire Collaborative Ministry

Note: Usher, D (2015) *Life Spirit...* Lindsey Press: ISBN-10: 0853190852. The book is available from Unitarian Headquarters £8.00 plus £1.50 p&p. (10% discount for bulk purchases for use with church groups.) See page 2 for address and telephone number. Also available from on-line booksellers.

Ordination held at Ullet Road Church

By Alex Bradley

The magnificent Ullet Road Church in Sefton Park, Liverpool was the setting on 9 January for a service of Ordination and Induction for the Rev Phil Waldron for his ministry to Southport Unitarians, Ullet Road Unitarian Church and Wirral Unitarians. The service was conducted by the Rev Dr David Steers, a Non-Subscribing Minister in Northern Ireland with personal roots in Liverpool and links with Ullet Road Church. The beauty of the service was enhanced by the singing of the choir and the organ music – including a piece by J S Bach, and congregational members provided various readings.

Our Presbyterian forebears believed that there should be a system by which the learning and suitability of prospective ministers should be tested by their fellow ministers and that congregations should consult with other ministers before appointing their own minister. (The GA and the colleges largely perform this function today.) For obvious reasons this sometimes touched on sensitive territory, to do with the rights of congregations to govern themselves in their own way!

However, ordination as a ceremony became increasingly rare, to the point of virtual non-existence, amongst the 'Rational Dissenters' and Unitarians from the 18th century onwards in England. There were a number of factors that contributed to this process, not least the sense in some quarters that it had echoes of a sacramental past, perhaps even an element of superstition about it. As a result many Unitarian ministers and their congregations ceased to practice it. Whilst this arose from understandable, perhaps even laudable motives, namely to preserve the freedom and autonomy of ministers and their congregations and to avoid notions of ministry as a form of hierarchy, passed on in a quasi-magical form, perhaps something precious was lost in the process.

After the Rev Jim Corrigall, minister to the Lancashire Collaborative Ministry, spoke his charge to the minister, David Steers asked 10 questions, to which Phil Waldron replied 'I do'. These questions echoed this former system of adjudging suitability of a candidate for ministry. They touched on his own beliefs, his commitment to continue his search for truth, including further reflection and study, his promise to seek peace and unity in his churches and concluded with his promise to be a faithful Unitarian minister.

Later on, the Rev Alex Bradley, principal of Unitarian College, Manchester and minister to Norcliffe Chapel, Styall, gave the charge to the congregations, followed by a hymn, after which David Steers led the Ordination and Induction ceremony, asking the congregations to commit themselves with 'open mind and warm heart'.

David Steers then invited all the ministers present (there were 15 Unitarians or Non-Subscribers and one Congregationalist) to come into the chancel and lay hands on Phil Waldron, while he declared the new candidate to be ordained 'recognising your call to ministry and inspired by the love of God, the light of Jesus and in the presence of the Holy Spirit'.

Alongside the pleasure and honour of being invited to take part, I found the ceremony a deeply moving experience. The 'laying on of hands' speaks to the primal importance of the sense of touch in our human relationships. Equally importantly, each one of the ministers taking part represents their congregations, who share in an interdependent web of



Ministerial colleagues lay hands on the Rev Phil Waldron, minister to the Ullet Road, Southport and Wirral congregations, during his ordination. Photo provided by Phil Waldron

love, support and fellowship with the congregations of the minister being ordained and inducted. Not only is there no hint of hierarchy but in fact the opposite is the case. It underlines our dependence on, and our interdependence with, each other, ministers and congregations and friends, signifying that we are all members one of another.

Notice General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches CO-OPTION OF ONE MEMBER OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

The Executive Committee is seeking applications for one co-opted member to serve from July 2016 until the end of the Annual Meetings in April 2017.

Applicants should demonstrate 3 years active commitment to the Unitarian community, be in sympathy with the Objects of the General Assembly and be eligible to stand in accordance with legal requirements for charity trusteeship.

Essential Requirements

- (1) Experience in one or other of the following:
 - As an officer or member of a congregational/district governing body, a committee of an affiliated body or of a charity trustee body or similar, eg. voluntary organisations such as a sports club or PTA.
 - As a Minister, Lay Pastor, Approved Lay Leader or Lay Person in Charge of a Unitarian congregation.
- (2) Good understanding of the Unitarian community.
- (3) Confidentiality.

Those interested should contact Derek McAuley, GA Chief Officer at dmcauley@unitarian.org.uk or 020 7240 2384 for further information and application package. Applicants should complete the application form and declaration and return to Derek McAuley by 5.00pm on Wednesday 4 May 2016 to enable consideration by the Executive Committee at their meeting on 13/14 May 2016.

Derek McAuley

Chief Officer

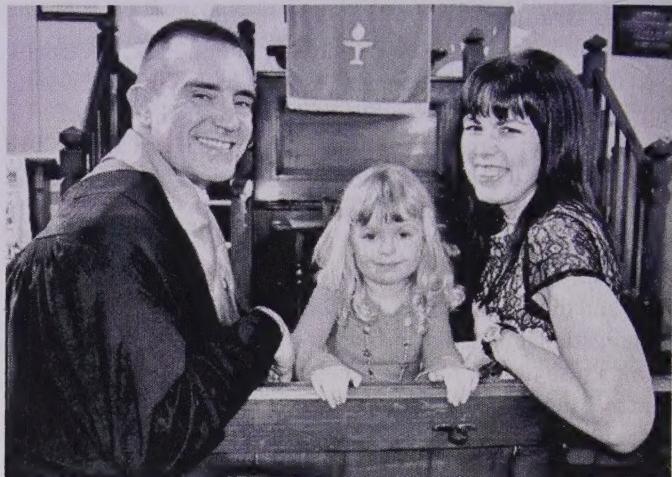
15 March 2016

Induction at Nottage for Lewis Rees

By Alex Bradley

Nottage is a delightful small village on the edge of Porthcawl, a scenic seaside resort in South Wales and the small General Baptist and Unitarian chapel, as it is called, stands in the centre of the village. The induction service for the chapel's new minister, the Rev Lewis Rees, took place on a sunny Saturday afternoon, 16 January, with the building filled to capacity.

The service was led with style and gentle humour by the Rev Eric Jones, minister emeritus of Aberdare and a former President of the General Assembly, with over 50 years of ministry behind him. Other ministerial colleagues and friends who took part in the service included the Rev John Carter who gave the charge to the minister, the Rev Ant Howe, who led the prayers, the Rev Jeff Gould, who gave a Biblical reading and a fellow Welsh minister, the Rev Wyn Thomas, who gave the charge to the congregation. The service was both dignified and happy. Other friends and Unitarians came from near and far, several in particular bringing greetings: Lis Dyson Jones (another former GA President) brought those of the General Assembly in the absence of the GA President, who had a previous engagement; Tony Foster, from the South Wales Unitarian Society (the local District); Melda Grantham from the Unitarian Welsh Department; and the Rev Jean Bradley, moderator of the Unitarian Christian Association, who,



Lewis Rees at the Nottage Chapel with his wife Cheryl and their daughter Liela.

knowing no Welsh, nevertheless spoke a couple of sentences in her greeting, which a Welsh friend sitting next to me in the pew said she understood perfectly. The Bridgend County Borough Mayor, Cllr Richard Young and the Porthcawl Town Council Mayor, Cllr David Newton-Williams, represented the local community.

Lewis Rees has made a long and sometimes far from easy journey to ministry, including periods of ill health, and the service was a splendid vindication and celebration of all his efforts and all those who helped him on his way. An induction service should reflect the character and personality of the minister and his congregation, and the happiness and love that was present shone through the proceedings like a golden thread. Lewis's family, his wife Cheryl and daughter Liela were there to share the joy of the day and perhaps the greatest highlight of the afternoon was when he lifted Liela up in his arms while speaking from the pulpit.

These are not easy times for churches of any denomination and Unitarians often struggle to make an impact on their local communities. It is all too easy to become disheartened and feel that there is little or nothing we can do to spread our message or give to the community. But the greetings brought by the local Town Mayor represented, for me at least, an answer to such discouragement. He spoke of his father, a local Presbyterian minister, who had a great friendship with the then-Unitarian minister and every New Year the two friends would celebrate with a meal between them.

We are sowing seeds wherever we go and the benefits often come long after we, the individual sowers, have passed on. Just as the two minister friends from different chapels found companionship decades ago, so their descendants, literally and figuratively, reaped the benefit of that friendship. We may worship God in different ways, but we seek to apply the Golden Rule of Jesus and so many other traditions, treating all as we would wish to be treated, respecting those of all faiths and those of none.

No induction service would be complete without the tea afterwards, and the Old School Room was a dream for lovers of savouries and those with sweet teeth and a nightmare for anyone counting calories. Old friends were greeted and new ones made. It was a happy and auspicious start for Lewis and his congregation and a fitting service of praise to God.

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Ministry Inquiry Day



Would you like to know more about training as a
Unitarian & Free Christian Minister
and about working with our congregations?

This summer the Ministry Strategy Group will be holding an Inquiry Day for people who are at an early stage of considering this possibility as well as for those who are almost ready to make an application for training.

There'll be chance to meet our tutors and recent graduates.

Venue: Leicester Great Meeting House, LE1 4SX
Date: Friday 29th July 2016

Time: 11am for 11.30 start – 3.30pm finish

Booking deadline: 22nd July
Advance booking is essential.

For more information and to book, please contact:

Mary-Jean Hennis at Unitarian General Assembly,
Essex Hall, 1 – 6 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY

Phone: 020 7240 2384 / Email: mhennis@unitarian.org.uk